

N.B. Naturalist

Le Naturaliste du N.-B.

Vol. 12, No. 4 1983



THE EASTERN COUGAR IN THE MARITIME PROVINCES

Gerry Parker

The cougar is a cat of many names. The first Europeans settling on the Atlantic Seaboard called the long-tailed cat "panther", a name given the Asiatic leopard. In the northeast it was called "Cat of the Mountain", shortened to "catamount", and in New Brunswick and Maine the "Indian Devil" or "Injun Devil". Later, as the frontiersmen reached the rockies, the name "Mountain Lion" was used; to the north in Canada it became "Cougar". In South America it was, and still is, known as "puma".

Although Young and Goldman recognize 15 subspecies of Felis concolor in North and Central America, there are few obvious physical differences. The subspecies recognized in northeastern United States and eastern Canada is Felis concolor cougari. The cougar was once the most widely distributed mammal in the western world. Ranging from the British Columbia-Yukon border to the tip of South America and from Atlantic to Pacific, it was equally at home in the tropical jungle, alpine boreal forest and desert badlands. With European settlement of North America, however, the cougar's eastern range shrunk dramatically until today the Florida subspecies is the only known extant population east of the Mississippi River.

Up to 1976 the existence of a viable population of Florida cougar, or panther, as it is often referred to, was in question. Evidence of its existence was present, such as scats, tracks and an occasional road kill, but the extent of its distribution and status was unknown. In 1976, as an outcome of a Florida Panther Conference convened by the Florida Audubon Society, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service appointed a Florida Panther Recovery team. In 1978 the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (comparable to our provincial Wildlife Division) established a Florida Panther Record Clearing-house to catalog and investigate panther reports. In February, 1981, the first panther was captured, radio-collared and released. A second panther was radio-collared 10 days later. In the next 2 years the team radio-collared a total of 7 panthers.

How is the Eastern Panther distinguished from its western cousin? Apparently with difficulty. The Florida subspecies is characterized by a dark dorsal line running down to the tip of the tail and, where the shoulder and neck join, a triangular patch of approximately 150 white spots the size of small peas. It should be mentioned that only in South America is the melanistic phase of Felis concolor known, although in northeastern North America many cougar reports are of black animals.

The typical Florida panther, besides the color characteristics noted above, is usually a uniform rusty or tawny cinnamon-buff colour (deer color) on the back and whitish underneath. The tip of the tail, back of the ears and sides of the nose are dark brown or blackish. Female Florida panthers average 60-80 pounds and males 100-120 pounds, smaller than the western races.

Throughout its vast range the largest of North American feline predators requires deer to sustain a viable population. Other prey species, however, may also frequently be taken. A cougar killed several years ago near the Manitoba-Ontario border had the remains of skunk in the stomach, porcupine quills in the snout, and was shot while raiding a chicken coop.

Early numbers of cougar in eastern North America are unknown, but due to low densities of White-tailed Deer, and the presence of the Eastern Timber Wolf, its numbers were probably never very high. References to the Eastern Cougar date back to the mid-1700's and continue throughout the 19th century. By the turn of the century, however, a lack of evidence of this big cat led to the conclusion by many that it had become extinct.

In 1938 Bruce Wright heard of sightings of the species in New Brunswick and from then until his death in 1975 he systematically recorded observations, both current and historical, and compiled the records and evidence into several articles and books. He first published an article on the Little St. John Lake specimen in the Journal of Mammalogy in 1961 and followed it with several other articles on the possibility of the continued survival of the Eastern Cougar. The Little St. John Lake specimen was trapped



Bruce Wright and the Little St. John Lake specimen.

in Maine near the Quebec border in 1938 and apparently represents the last documented Eastern Cougar. The mounted specimen resides at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

There are no records of cougars having once been distributed in Nova Scotia. This is not surprising. Records suggest that the White-tailed Deer became extinct in that province long before the arrival of the first European explorers and did not again enter the province until late in the 1800's. The absence in Nova Scotia of deer, the preferred food of the cougar, would almost certainly suggest an absence of the cougar.

Bruce Wright lists approximately 220 reports of evidence of cougars in New Brunswick from 1938 to 1971 and an additional 26 from Nova Scotia. He made plaster casts of tracks later identified as those of a cougar and photographed impressions left in the snow of tracks and tail drag. His evidence is impressive.

In 1977, Canadian Wildlife Service, Atlantic Region, recognizing the need for a central clearing-house for reports of cougars in the Maritimes, made such a proposal to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Both provinces agreed to the arrangement and provincial biologists regularly channel such reports to me at the Canadian Wildlife Service regional office in Sackville, New Brunswick. To facilitate the recording of information, I have designed and distributed a 2-page cougar report form.

Up to August, 1983, we have received 110 reports of cougars in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. We have also received several reports from Newfoundland. Is there a pattern to these sightings? Not really. Although few reports come from southern Nova Scotia and quite a few from southern New Brunswick and eastern Nova Scotia, they are distributed pretty well throughout both provinces.

So what evidence have these 110 reports provided for the continued existence of the species in eastern Canada? Only the written testimony of so many persons who swear on a stack of Bibles that what they saw was a tawny-brown to black, 100-150 pound, long-tailed cat which, for those who had the opportunity to view it at close hand for more than several seconds, represented the most magnificent creature they had ever seen.

When most reports reach our office, they are more than several days old and many are made from moving vehicles. Unless the area in question is examined immediately following the sighting the opportunity to obtain casts of the tracks is usually lost. We do have a few casts which - although I, for one, hesitate to conclude are cougar tracks - do show characteristics which are unlike most other wild animals in the Maritimes.

Three occasions to photograph a suspected cougar have proven less than satisfactory. One proved to be a double exposure, the other two, taken with instamatic cameras, show only an unidentifiable dark speck in the background.

We have received reports of cougars attacking horses, eating dogs, harassing communities and, yes, chasing cars.

So what are all these people seeing? The fleeting glimpses from a car of a possible cougar crossing a road are the most suspect and could be anything from a house cat to a bear. But what about the one seen by the experienced hunter near Petitcodiac, New Brunswick? While sitting patiently in a hardwood stand waiting for a deer, a movement to one side caught his attention. Less than 30 feet away walked a large, tawny, long-tailed cat. Catching a glimpse of the hunter's movement, the cat wheeled and disappeared without a sound. In the same area, an R.C.M.P. officer, while deer hunting, watched a cougar for a minute or so through the scope of his rifle.

What about the experienced outdoors- and salmon fisherman on the Miramichi who, at the close of a day's fishing, was relaxing overlooking his favorite pool and enjoying the closing day when a cougar approached the stream below him, paused, then entered the water, swam across and disappeared in the forest?

What about the wildlife technician who, from the cab of his parked pickup, saw a deer bound across the road in front of the vehicle, followed by a cougar which paused, glanced at the truck, then, in one bound, cleared the road and bounded up a slope through a cutover. The wildlife technician had seen live and dead cougars in Alberta and was definite in what he saw. One year later, two wildlife students working with me identified a cougar on the road within 1/4 mile of that seen by the technician.

In the past 5 years, cougars have been reported by wildlife technicians, medical doctors, veterinarians, housewives, experienced naturalists, hunters, fishermen - a random assortment of the general population. On the other hand, one cannot discount the evidence that the cougar is not found here and that these reports are merely misidentified cats, dogs, bears, coyotes or some other common creature.

It is a fact that in over 50 years we do not have a confirmed specimen. That, in itself, is just reason for many to doubt the presence of Eastern Cougars, and perhaps they are right. Surely a specimen would have been shot by a hunter or hit by a vehicle. But perhaps one has been. It is doubtful that the hunter, most of whom realize that the cougar is a protected species in both provinces, would proudly display his trophy. Most likely the carcass would be left in the woods. As for road kills, the chances of a cougar being struck by a vehicle are slim, especially where their numbers must be so few. (They aren't nearly as stupid or slow of foot as a porcupine!) Of the thousands of bobcats in the Maritimes, not many road kills are reported each year. What about trapping? Why doesn't one show up in a snare or leg-hold trap? Other than a foot snare for bear, I doubt most

traps would hold a 150 lb. cat. Why hasn't a cougar been treed by cat hounds? A good question, and one for which I have no simple answer. Perhaps the occasion has just not presented itself. If cougars are here, their numbers are few. One cat hound owner, a district ranger, told me of tracking a suspected cougar in snow with his proven cat hound. Normally a vocal and free-spirited pooch, the dog would not leave his master's sight, continually checking to see if he was close behind. The track was left after several miles. And what of the carcasses of cougars which meet their fate in one manner or another? Why doesn't someone find the remains of one? Again, the chances are so remote of this happening that, unless the animal was killed on a highway or shot, it would be a rare opportunity to stumble onto the remains of a cougar in the wild.

On a 530 acre wilderness park at the end of a peninsula within the city limits of Seattle, a cougar was sighted in August 1981. The park was closed and for one full day three cat hounds combed the area to no avail. The following day the cougar was seen by police sunning itself on the main road so 6 more cat hounds were brought in. After another full day, no trace of the cougar could be found. The hounds never indicated a cougar was, or had been, in the area. It was seen again the following day along with a track and scat, the first tangible evidence of its presence in three days of hunting. The six dogs were released again in the immediate area and after 9 hours a young male cougar was treed, tranquilized and removed from the park. This last hunt involved several Game Department people, half a dozen park employees, several Navy security personnel and numerous news people.

This shows how difficult it can be to obtain tangible evidence of a cougar, even by trained personnel and dogs in a relatively small area. It also helps to place in perspective the odds against one of the few cougars which may still inhabit the Maritimes being captured or killed.

So what can, or should, be done now regarding the Eastern Cougar in the Maritimes? The species presently receives full protection in both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. As no specimens are showing up dead or alive, legally or illegally, it must be assumed, if you are an optimist, that the complete protection offered the species is effective (or, if you are a pessimist, that this merely provides further evidence that the cougar has long since vanished from the Maritimes). You may say that indirectly the survival of the cougar is being enhanced by the expanding deer population, so perhaps the provincial big game biologists deserve a pat on the back.

What about the loss of habitat? Is the continual loss of mature spruce-fir forest in the Maritimes detrimental to the survival of the species? I would suggest not. The changing forests

have contributed to increased deer numbers and for a large predator like the cougar the availability of suitable prey is primary to a viable breeding population. As the cougar is found in such a wide variety of habitats throughout its range in North and South America, it must be one of the more adaptable of large predators, capable of living in wilderness isolation and in close proximity to man.

I suggest that all that can be done is being done. That includes recognizing the possible survival of the species in the Maritimes and giving it complete protection, providing a central clearing-house for reports and sightings, and letting those people who believe they have seen a cougar know that, rather than being scoffed at, they just may have seen the rarest and probably the most impressive of the larger mammals of eastern North America. If and when the presence of the cougar is established then perhaps a federal-provincial research study could be justified, similar to that mentioned earlier in Florida. Until then the possible presence of the cougar "out there in the woods", and the controversy surrounding it adds an exciting dimension to the appeal of the outdoors of the Maritimes.

Canadian Wildlife Service,
Sackville, N.B.

RECOMPENSES

La FNNB a récemment conférer à Arthur (Cal) Callaghan de Musquash le statut de membre honoraire à vie de la Fédération. L'honneur lui a été conféré à l'assemblée annuelle générale par le Conseil d'administration de la Fédération en reconnaissance d'un appui de longue date à la FNNB, du rôle positif qu'il a joué dans le Club des naturalistes de Saint-Jean et de ses années de service bénévole au Département des Sciences naturelles du Musée du Nouveau-Brunswick.

Après la réception de sa carte de membre honoraire qui se fit sous les chaleureux applaudissements de ses amis et de ses confrères naturalistes, on lui a entendu dire que ce statut honorifique qui venait de lui être conféré était presque - mais pas tout à fait - aussi exaltant que le statut de grand-grand-grand-papa qui venait également de lui être conféré, il y a peu de temps passé.